



Diabetes Prevention: Why We Can't Wait

*By Frenchy Risco
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Several years ago, the city of Philadelphia was declared the fattest city in the nation, prompting its Mayor to launch the *Fit, Fun & Free!* healthy living program and to challenge Philadelphians to become physically active and healthy eaters. Many residents joined the program, but I wasn't one of them—until now.

My wake up call came recently, when I saw a friend in the hospital with half his right leg gone, the result of diabetes. When I saw him like that—someone I had known for 50 years—it had a big impact on me. I realized how much I'd been taking my own health for granted. I believed I was fortunate: there was no history of diabetes in my family. I didn't think I was at risk. I was wrong.

I am a 61-year-old African American who, like most Americans, had too little physical activity and too much fried and fast food in my diet. My view was that if the food wasn't fried with meat on the side, the meal wasn't for me. And as a real estate executive, I drove or took taxis to meet my clients instead of walking the couple of blocks. My ethnicity along with my age and lack of physical activity were putting me at an increase risk of developing type 2 diabetes.

After I saw my friend in the hospital, I immediately became involved in the *Fit, Fun & Free!* healthy living program. I wanted to be healthy. I wanted to reduce my risk for type 2 diabetes. The program taught me how to cook healthy meals that taste good. I also have become more active. I now walk two to three miles a day. I feel like a different person. *I am* a different person.

Certain events in our lives happen, and there is nothing we can do about them. Developing type 2 diabetes doesn't have to be one of those things. My buddy was unable to take advantage of the information and resources that may have helped him control his diabetes better and prevent the devastating complications associated with the disease. I have a chance to prevent or delay diabetes in my life, and I choose to be proactive rather than reactive. Within a month of starting the *Fit, Fun & Free!* healthy living program, my life changed. I am certain that my program of eating well and getting active has helped to delay or prevent my risk for type 2 diabetes.

The National Diabetes Education Program (NDEP) has launched an informative campaign, "More Than 50 Ways to Prevent Diabetes," that is targeted to the African American community. Using amusing rhymes like "Less on your plate, Nate" and "Snack on a veggie, Reggie," the campaign zeroes in on our ability to use humor to cope with serious matters—one of which is preventing the high prevalence of type 2 diabetes in the African American community. NDEP has developed these creative messages so that we can be more creative about developing healthier lifestyles.

I encourage you to take these tips to heart and use them with your friends and loved ones. Challenge your friends with suggestions like:

- Try taking the stairs to your office.
- Turn up the music and jam while doing household chores.
- Instead of frying, try different recipes for baking or broiling meat, chicken and fish.

These are simple tips that can help us increase our physical activity and eat healthier to lick our higher incidence of diabetes.

The science of diabetes prevention is clear -- we need to come up with healthy ways to lose just 5 to 7 percent of our body weight to decrease our risk of developing type 2 diabetes (for a person that weighs 200 lbs. that is only 10 to 15 lbs.) It's never too late. This loss can be achieved by getting 30 minutes of physical activity five days a week and by eating healthy foods in smaller portions. This campaign to lose weight through small changes in our behavior is not about looking good, it's about feeling good for life.

All rhymes aside, diabetes prevention is too late for my friend, but I'm doing all I can to let others in the African American community know how to prevent diabetes. NDEP says there are 'More than 50 ways to prevent diabetes.' I've shared the three most important ones with you: lose a small amount of weight, get physically active, eat healthy foods in smaller portions. I urge you to add methods of your own and challenge your friends and loved ones to do the same. There are many things out of our control, but diabetes prevention is not one of them. Join me in my quest and become a community leader on the road to a healthier, diabetes-free African American community.

For more tips on how you can prevent type 2 diabetes, visit www.ndep.nih.gov or call 1-800-438-5383 and ask for the "More than 50 Ways to Prevent Diabetes" tip sheet.

Frenchy Risco, a 61-year-old grandfather of nine, is a real estate developer in Philadelphia. As a member of the National Diabetes Education Program's Small Steps. Big Rewards. Team to Prevent type 2 Diabetes, Risco is leading by example that type 2 diabetes can be prevented in the African American community.

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